Scholastic Success

Scholastic Microzine brought Apples to teachers and students

By Kay Savetz

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From 1983 to 1991, Scholastic published a bi-monthly disk called Microzine. Aimed at grade schools and middle schools, each issue consisted of four educational games that students could play in the computer labs that were being introduced across the country.

I interviewed two of Scholastic's alumni, editors Amy Kefauver and Lorri Hopping, about their experiences working on Microzine.

Scholastic Wizware
Premier Issue
Four full-length programs that let you explore and create.
Microzine
Ages 10 and up
Volume 1, Number 4
Four full-length programs on a two-sided disk
Volume I, Number 6
A Computer Learning Library on a Disk
Featuring:
Tickets to America
Solar Pilot
A Traveler's Guide to Fantastic Places

A complete curriculum: Microzine innocuously offered students several learning objectives.

Kay Savetz: How did you come to work on Microzine?

Amy Kefauver: I was an English literature major in college, and I knew I wanted to be in children's publishing, so I came to New York and Scholastic was my second job. I started off in the book club division, then I was in the classroom magazine division, working on magazines for fifth grade kids. Scholastic recognized that computers were coming into the classroom and they needed to have a presence there. So they started a whole new division, and very quickly after they started up, they posted some jobs, and I applied. I joined as an associate editor and was completely thrilled to be part of it.

Lorri Hopping: I started just fresh out of college in 1982 at Scholastic's new magazine called Electronic Learning. They put me on staff as a gopher, reporter, and editorial assistant for the summer, and I had to learn computers from scratch. That led to the job with Teaching and Computers—another spin-off magazine for teachers, where I learned BASIC programming.

Teachers were clamoring for material and programs, so Scholastic started a software division. They tapped me because nobody knew how to do this stuff. Nobody knew computers; nobody understood user response; nobody understood that your viewer is a character. So they hired a lot of writers who were all pioneering and struggling through this new medium, but because I had done a lot of "choose your own adventure" books and understood how BASIC programming logic worked and understood loops and IF-THEN conditional clauses, I went to town with it. I loved my very first video game script that I wrote, "Escape from Antcatraz", launched me in this whole new direction and career—a whole new way of thinking of story and relating to the user, of having a dialogue with the user and anticipating what they're going to do. It was some of the most difficult kind of writing to do, but for me, that was fun and a challenge. It was a sweet spot where you could be a writer on a video game, and they would hire the writers first, and then the artists, and then the coders. That all got flopped around

Escape from Antcatraz: This illustrated text adventure made small insects into a big deal.

when the graphics took over, and we went into the CD-ROM era.

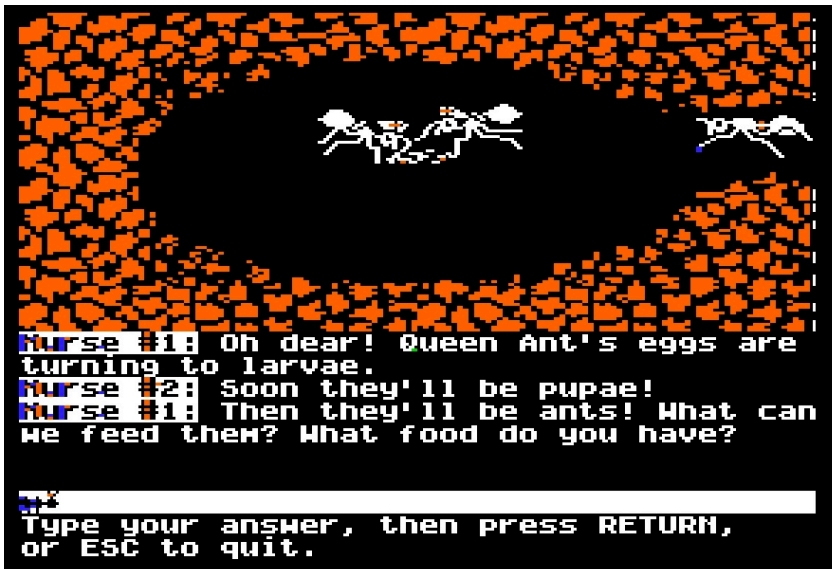
Savetz: How did you decide what the curriculum or educational goals of the games would be?

Kefauver: Scholastic's a big company, so we had a lot of resources. The marketing division and salespeople knew what the different curricula needed to be. Nationwide, there's a lot of consistency in what's taught in fourth and fifth grades, so we knew that, for the [Choose Your Own Adventure-style] Twistaplots, we just had to get the reading level right and choose topics that the kids would find intriguing. I would look over the year's editorial calendar and try to have a good balance, a mix of science and math and history, and split it up between the issues, so that one wasn't heavily weighted in one area or another.

Between the editors and programmers, there was never a lack of ideas. Sometimes, the hard decision was, "What do we leave out?" There were all these things that we wanted to do, and we could only do about 20 programs a year. Also, we were constrained by the limits of the machine and how much we could fit on a disk.

Hopping: Each program had to teach kids and still had to be fun. That's still a challenge. The technical challenge was the computer's memory, which was really restrictive. For "Antcatraz", I practically wrote a movie script with hyperlinks embedded in text to tell where to go if the user pressed this or that. That works when you have a 64K machine and your graphics are mostly static.

As a writer, you want to expand, but you had to be very compact and think about graphics economically. So one of the programs I did, "Safari", was set in one location, but you play as six different animals. So even though you go in to the same setting six times, you can play the game six different ways. If you're a different animal, you're going to have different experiences and different


Nurse #1: Oh dear! Queen Ant's eggs are turning to larvae.
Nurse #2: Soon they'll be pupae!
Nurse #1: Then they'll be ants! What can we feed them? What food do you have?
Type your answer, then press RETURN, or ESC to quit.

Save the queen: Lorri Hopping's game modeled ants' actual social and biological structures.

reactions—you're the predator or prey, you have to find certain foods—there's going to be a certain adventure. But the graphics stayed static, essentially. So you had a lot more room in the code to do other things by keeping the graphics simple. That was one solution. We wouldn't have to do that these days. These days, you could take each animal out on infinite procedurally generated worlds of adventure and endless safaris if you wanted to. That was definitely a constraint during the 1980s. By the 1990s, that loosened up.

Savetz: Safari sounds like fun. What other games did you work on?

Hopping: I did "Quest for the Pole", which was based on a true story of the Franklin expedition to the Arctic. I did a lot of research and fact-checking for that one, but it's still a branching adventure story, a survival story: do this, you die; do this, you don't. You learned a lot about sled dogs and other non-fiction. "Antcatraz" was actually similar, in that you were learning about ants. It was fact-based, but the adventure itself was really science fiction because you're not really an ant. You're not really trapped inside of an anthill. Whereas "Quest for the Pole" was a pretty straightforward adventure.

I also did the "Balloonatics", which was sort of a Jules Verne *Around the World in 80 Days*-style balloon adventure. But it was a language arts adventure, so you're just going in this balloon to these different locations, and it had a learning game embedded in it. The whole adventure was just a structure to get you to practice your grammar and language. It was published in Microzine Junior, for younger children ages six to eight, whereas Microzine was for nine years old and up.

Savetz: Did you ever get push back from editors saying, "This game needs to be more educational" or "This is educational, but it's not fun?" How did you find that balance?

Hopping: With "Antcatraz", the first one I wrote, Amy just gave me a topic. I remember sitting there, thinking: well, you want to be inside the anthill. But then what happens? And then I completely invented every little chamber that you went to—every little section that you went to—all the choices that you made. And as long as the science was solid, as long as the ants acted the way they were supposed to scientifically, if they were this kind of ant, they were going to behave this way... It was okay that they talked, you know. Even those Twistaplots about science can have talking ants! There are scientists who would rebel a little bit about anthropomorphizing, but it's an adventure game, and the fun really came from the personalities of the ants. It had Arnolda, the soldier who was really strong from Arnold Schwarzenegger. I had some really corny stuff in there that they left in. It was great!

Savetz: I love the Twistaplots that start by asking, "Do you want to play as a boy or a girl?"

Kefauver: That helped with the pronouns, too. But that's so funny. I remember demoing, it might have been "Pirates of the Soft Seas", but after you chose your gender, you typed in your name. I was sort of horsing around, and senior project editor Jeffrey Siegel was with me, and I typed in that I was a boy and then typed in that my name was Sue. I looked over at Jeff, and he was like, "Oh my god, a boy named Sue." It was so corny. But the audience thought it was funny. I thought it was hilarious, that they were trying to make it fun for the kids—they can fool around with it a little bit and still get their work done.

Savetz: Some of the later Twistaplot stories moved from a choose-your-own-adventure format to more of a text adventure format, with players inputting their commands instead of choosing from a menu of options. What prompted that change?

Kefauver: If you're trying to have the kids learn something, remember something, and make good guesses based on what they've read, then you're directing them to the ending. When we went from the original menu-driven, multiple-ending format to having just one ending, the stories actually became longer and more complex, so that the kids would feel that they accomplished something by the time they got all the way through it, and that it was worth going back and making a couple of attempts to get it right.

Savetz: What was the lead time on production?

Kefauver: We did five issues per school year, which was a lot; it meant you always had something in different stages of productions. I had a big wall in my office that had the status of every program. It was like a war board or something: where was each piece? Was it with the developers? Is it with the programmers? Is it with this editor? Is it in testing? So we could keep it moving through.

Each issue took at least two months, but four was safer because you had to create this stuff, then test it rigorously because it was going into the schools, and teachers had to be convinced they wanted this and needed it. But we decided that we were going to create

something that kids could totally use on their own, so the printed documentation was pretty light. There was a lot of the documentation built into the actual programs, which they could get just by pressing a question mark and getting a help screen. But we hired a lot of local kids to come in and bang on those programs, and they were triumphant when they could make it crash. Of course, we insisted that they write us very detailed

reports on “What the heck did you do to make this crash?” and then we would take it back to our offices, try to recreate it, then we would go to the programmers and work on that.

Savetz: Did you get any feedback from students and teachers?

Kefauver: All the feedback from the kids was overwhelmingly positive! They liked the Twistaplots a lot, and anything that smacked of a video game, of course, was really popular. They were always eager for more and would ask, “Why can’t you do this?” or “Why can’t you do something about that?” They wanted Twistaplots about dinosaurs, and they wanted outer space and all that kinds of stuff.

Hopping: A couple years ago, somebody contacted me who was a Microzine fan. Microzine kids are grown up now. Anybody who had this program or remembers it — you know, this was 30 years ago. They’re now parents, right? So, some of these programs and games were the things they remembered doing as kids, and I think there’s a sweet spot when you’re eight to about 12, the things that you do at that age become magical. And when you become an adult, that’s what you look back to. That’s when trading baseball cards or whether it’s collecting figurines or Beanie Babies or whatever it was you did from 8–12... In that sweet spot I think you end up with a fondness and a nostalgia that I think is really sweet. And it does come back to me every once in a while. On Twitter, somebody contacted me and found “Antcatraz” and said, “Oh my gosh! You’re the ‘Antcatraz’ lady.” It’s really a fun part of getting stuff out there, even if it’s a floppy disk and not streaming.

Savetz: What about feedback from teachers?

Kefauver: Some of the teachers were more critical, which you would expect, and we always tried to listen to that. A lot of times, the feedback was that the programs didn’t do enough, that they weren’t powerful enough. I’m sure it sounded like an excuse to them, but it was just a factor that we were working with 64K or 128K of memory. It was really little back then, and there is only so much you can do, especially when you have programs with a lot of graphics. Everything was so primitive back then. It took enormous amounts of space, and so we had to be careful and try to get in as much information but also keep the kids engaged. Teachers would say, “This is kind of a puny program.” We were like, “Oh, we’re really doing the best we can with the limits of the machine.”

Some teachers may’ve felt that the games weren’t scholarly enough, that a lot of it was sort of too much fun—and the earlier Twistaplots were absolutely just pure fiction. But after a few years, we got a couple of fabulous writers who were science writers as well as good fiction writers. After that, the way you moved through a Twistaplot was to

read, comprehend what you were reading, answer some scientific questions, and make some good guesses. For Lorri's "Escape from Antcatraz", kids had to learn a lot about ants and their biology and social cultures to get through the story. That was one game we did in response to feedback from teachers.

We also conducted school visits, where we took our software developers into the schools. I'd always pair up an editor with one of the programmers, and they went out as a team. I think that benefited the product a lot. The programmers were so brilliant at what they did, but to see it in use with someone less skilled than they were, an 8-year-old or 10-year-old kid, and to see what they could and couldn't do was a real eye opener for them. Something seems so clear to you, and then you go and you watch somebody else try to understand your directions on the screen or something and they're not getting it. That was important, too. The product benefited because the programmers came back with a better understanding of who their actual audience was. The kids weren't our customers, but they were our

audience, so we wanted this to be for them—and the editors got a big snootful of what was and wasn't working, as far as how the program was designed.

Savetz: Why did Microzine come to an end?

Kefauver: The market got a bit saturated. Scholastic Software was in full swing then, and I think that they wanted to devote more time to different and one-off products, which would stay for a couple of years. Microzine was absolutely one of the more expensive items to produce, so I think they felt that we'd had a good run and it was time for them to move on.

Savetz: If you could send a message to those grownups who were kids using Microzine back in the day, what would you tell them?

Hopping: I would say thank you! And I would love to hear your memories. It's been so long! I really didn't get a lot of direct feedback, and I would like to know what people are playing now. All those things we created—I see now iterated out there in different forms. "Grow your plants and take care of them"—we had a game like that at Scholastic, and now FarmVille is big. I'm really, really curious about that evolution. If people are Microzine fans, and if we set them on the track to some beloved kind of programming or some game that they love, I would love to hear that. Especially as I'm still in the industry, I want to know: what resonates? What works?

Kefauver: I would say that I hope that they're still really excited about trying new things, whether it's on the computer or anywhere else, that I hope that they still have all that energy and enthusiasm that makes them actually pick up a pencil and write to

somebody who's working on it, because we get as excited about it as they do. I just hope the energy and excitement is still there.

Kefauver's web site: https://amyinthegarden.wordpress.com

Hopping's web site: https://www.hoppingfun.com

The unabridged audio of this interview is available at https://archive.org/details/ScholasticMicrozine

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